

The Proof is in Your Patience

Jesus once told a parable about a king who decides to settle his accounts with his debtors. His bookkeeper surfaces a fellow who owes not thousands or hundreds of thousands but millions of dollars. The king summarily declares that the man and his wife and kids are to be sold to pay the debt. Because of his inability to pay, the man is about to lose everything and everyone dear to him. No wonder “the man fell down before the king and begged him, ‘Oh, sir, be *patient* with me, and I will pay it all.’ Then the king was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. (Matt. 18:26-27 NLT, emphasis mine)

The word *patience* makes a surprise appearance here. The debtor does not plead for mercy or forgiveness; he pleads for patience. Equally curious is this singular appearance of the word. Jesus uses it twice in this story and never again. It appears nowhere else in the Gospels. Perhaps the scarce usage is the first-century equivalent of a high-lighter. Jesus reserves the word for one occasion to make one point. Patience is more than a virtue for long lines and slow waiters. Patience is the red carpet upon which God’s grace approaches us.

No Patience, No Mercy

Had there been no patience, there would have been no mercy. But the king was patient, and the man with the multimillion-dollar debt was forgiven.

But then the story takes a left turn. The freshly forgiven fellow makes a beeline from the courthouse to the suburbs. There he searches out a guy who owes him some money.

“But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be *patient* and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn’t wait. He had the man arrested and jailed until the debt could be paid in full. (vv. 28-30 NLT, emphasis mine)

The king is stunned. How could the man be so impatient? How *dare* the man be so impatient! The ink of the CANCELED stamp is still moist on the man’s bills. Wouldn’t you expect a little Mother Teresa-ness out of him? You’d think that a person who’d been forgiven so much would love much. But he didn’t. And his lack of love led to a costly mistake.

King Responds

The unforgiving servant is called back to the castle.

“You evil servant!” [the king, a.k.a. God, declares.] “I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?” Then the angry king sent the man to prison until he had paid every penny. (Matt. 18:32-34 NLT)

The king's patience made no difference in the man's life. To the servant, throne-room mercy was nothing more than a canceled test, a dodged bullet, a get-out-of-jail-free card. He wasn't stunned by the royal grace; he was relieved he hadn't been punished. He was given much patience but gave none, which makes us wonder if he actually understood the gift he had received.

If you find patience hard to give, you might ask the same question. How infiltrated are you with God's patience? You've heard about it. Read about it. Perhaps underlined Bible passages regarding it. But have you received it? The proof is in your patience. Patience deeply received results in patience freely offered.

But patience never received leads to an abundance of problems, not the least of which is prison. Remember where the king sent the unforgiving servant? "Then the angry king sent the man to prison until he had paid every penny" (Matt. 18:34 NLT)

Whew! We sigh. *Glad that story is a parable. It's a good thing God doesn't imprison the impatient in real life.* Don't be so sure he doesn't. Self-absorption and ingratitude make for thick walls and lonely jails.

Fruit of the Spirit

Impatience still imprisons the soul. For that reason, our God is quick to help us avoid it. He does more than demand patience from us; he offers it to us. Patience is a fruit of his Spirit. It hangs from the tree of Galatians 5:22: "the Spirit produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience." Have you asked God to give you some fruit? *Well I did once, but . . .* But what? Did you, h'm, grow impatient? Ask him again and again and again. He won't grow impatient with your pleading, and you will receive patience in your praying.

And while you're praying, ask for understanding. "Patient people have great understanding" (Prov. 14:29). Could it be your impatience stems from a lack of understanding? Mine has.

Lesson in Patience

Sometime ago our church staff attended a leadership conference. Especially interested in one class, I arrived early and snagged a front-row seat. As the speaker began, however, I was distracted by a couple of voices in the back of the room. Two guys were mumbling to each other. I was giving serious thought to shooting a glare over my shoulder when the speaker offered an explanation. "Forgive me," he said. "I forgot to explain why the two fellows at the back of the class are talking. One of them is an elder at a new church in Romania. He has traveled her to learn about church leadership. But he doesn't speak English, so the message is being translated."

All of a sudden everything changed. Patience replaced impatience. Why? Because patience always hitches a ride with understanding. The wise man says, "A man of understanding holds his tongue" (Prov. 11:12 NIV). He also says, "A man of understanding is even-tempered" (Prov. 17:27 NIV). Don't miss the connection between understanding and patience. Before you blow up, listen up. Before you strike out, tune in. "It takes wisdom to have a good family, and it takes understanding to make it strong" (Prov. 24:3).

Before anything else, love is patient.